

Oral History Interview with Harry White Jr.
September 2, 1998
by Evelyn McClure and Mike Wilson

Some comments made about an accident.
Steamer....fell under the train.

E: Was he a young man?

HW: I wouldn't know. Day shift trainmaster was on watch. He'd come from lunch.

E: There was more than one trainmaster?

HW: They'd have two shifts when the cars were going the last car pulling in at 12 and they ran the main 1 hour between here and Santa Rosa and Forestville, it would slack off after workday they had no timetable.

E: Do you remember the name of the other trainmaster?

HW: Woodward he lived a couple houses up the street.

E: Willow? On a side street?

HW: No off Main, some houses have been torn down and rebuilt there were four houses near the depot. The outside perimeter hadn't been changed.

E: The florist was here a long time. For the record give me your full name.

HW: Harry Orlan White Jr. This is my niece.

(Niece): Harry Sr. was my grandfather.

E: When did your family first come to Sonoma County?

HW: The story goes my father was an engineer in a copper mine in Montana in 1907. Father and mother were going East to Boston and stopped in San Francisco, a layover of two days. My Mom said to my Dad my aunt's in Sebastopol, don't you think we ought to go up to see her and they never left.

E: When did your relative come to Sebastopol?

HW: I really don't know. They were renting. at the U.S. Hotel. (Aunt and Uncle were the Charles Glidden family) It was the 1906 earthquake...family came in 1907 when the mine closed

(in Montana). I don't know who recommended my father for the railroad. They lived on a ranch in Petaluma. My sister was born on the ranch. I was born there when they moved back I was 3 and we lived on Main Street, 3-4 months and they bought a house on Calder Avenue.

E: 3 children?

HW: No 2 living, one son born on the hill and he had injuries at birth and passed on. My wife and I had 3 boys and 1 passed on and two girls.

E: So you grew up here in Sebastopol? Did you go to Analy High School?

HW: Yes, I managed to get out in 4 years.

E: You've seen Sebastopol change a lot. What do you remember about the railroad? Did you ride it a lot?

HW: Oh sure.

E: What was the fare?

HW: About 25 cents. For a number of years it was talked about running a spur track to Mirabel to pick up on summer trade but they never got that far.

E: What did you do after high school?

HW: Worked. My mother ran the theater across the street from here, as projectionist.

E: The El Rey?

HW: Royal

E: Silent movies?

HW: When radio came along, in order to get an audience when Amos and Andy came along they put the radio on the stage and we ran Amos and Andy every night before we'd start the film.

E: How long did they run the theater?

HW: A couple years. There was the changeover from silent to sound. First sound we had was portable brought in by an outfit, sound on a disk. The picture was "Wings." They had motor sounds and airplane acrobats in WWI.

E: Let's talk about your father and his career. He took a job here and worked for a number of

years and did you see a lot of changes in his job? Can you tell me what sort of stories he'd tell you when he came home from work?

HW: He didn't do a lot of talking in our younger age. I was 9 when we moved off the hill and my mother, sister and I were down with the flu (1918) we didn't have money enough to hire help.

E: Your father didn't get sick?

HW: I guess he fought it. We were convalescing and somewhere along the line the doctor suggested tapioca would be good for us and my sister and I wondered what that would be like. My mother said your Dad won't fix that anyhow, don't worry about it. About 4:35 in the afternoon, he comes in with a bowl of tapioca. We all remembered that. Mom didn't know what she was talking about.

E: And it tasted good I bet.

HW: Oh yeah.

E: So you got through the influenza epidemic. What happened with your family life? Was it summer on during the school year that you got sick?

HW: More in winter. We visited with him and had dinner separate then my aunt put a lunch down to my Dad. My mother sent a hot meal down to my Dad every night. My sister was 3 years older than I, first she took the lunch and in the winter time I'd go along with her, by the time I was 9 I was fetching the lunch.

E: Tell us about the lunch, it sounds like it was an elaborate dinner really. What did your mother make?

HW: Ordinarily a meat and potato, it was all hot. Had an egg basket, old style with double handle and she'd put the dishes in and kept it hot and when the train men were in the office when we'd take Dad's lunch, they'd say my God he eats an awful lot. They'd make a joke of it and never failed to do so each time. We were still on the hill when Sheriff Petray was shot. Streetcars were still running then. Dad was deputized for years because he prepared receipts and all. He was on day shift at the time of the killing and he had of course a revolver and they phone ahead and said (the perpetrators were riding the streetcar) they (the authorities) found the car, so he called mother and my sister and I took the gun down to him.

E: What did he do, wait until the car came in?

HW: They got off and went into the hotel on 9th Street and Wilson, on the corner was my wife's parents property and they had a grocery store.

They caught them in the hotel. Well they didn't catch them, but the sheriff was shot (there) they

built a memorial on the square to him for years in Santa Rosa, corner of 4th Street, but it was torn down.

E: WWII came along and things got difficult for your father?

HW: Yes, I was married, my sister was married, we had our own families. We had a company phone in the house. All the years he was trainmaster.

E: A direct line to the station?

HW: Yes, that determined where we lived. That is why we lived on Calder. They ran a direct line up Petaluma Ave up the hill. We rented the sheet metal house built by a sea captain (on Eleanor St.) There were 5 cupolas and a porch around the bottom and top.

E: Was it a big house?

HW: 9 or 10 rooms. it was torn down. There was a flag staff on a cupola at that time we were right on the car tracks practically from the back. Captain Locke (verify) was the builder. Bill Carr tore it down.

E: Tell me about your father's death and what happened. When did you find out.

HW: Dad in his spare time...radio wireless..he produced a receiver and had backers from the hop business. At that time hops were a big industry they shipped a lot of hops (by rail) from Santa Rosa. Had a hop shed there.

E: So he was trying to make this into a business with an income?

HW: It was more an invention than a business. They called it wireless, my mother said she couldn't see why they call it wireless with wires all over the place. He was receiving a signal much farther than they were able to at the time.

E: Were many people sending radio programs?

HW: No it was all governmental along towards the end of the war they got started developing better (programs?) I have one didn't have a socket and the wires came out...that was way separate from his work. (family comments; The FBI came because of ? rails and he wasn't sure what they were up to.

HW: Someone else got the patent first on a similar invention.

E: FBI came and checked out the railroad?

(family comments: Someone caused a derailment)

E: Oh they were thinking it was sabotage?

HW: (Comments on looking at photos of his father) He is in his office.

E: What is this cubbyhole?

HW: That was the fuse box that's where he had (unintelligible) to deal with drunks late at night. The other picture is just after the station was completed.

E: Here is the 1941 ? obituary clipping.

HW: This was the clock that was controlled by Western Union, Pacific Time. They had the same system all the schools in town. The main clock was in the Western Union Office on Main Street, going North/west side.

E: What does the trainmaster do, what were your father's duties?

HW: Running cars - freight train both ways on the track and it's up to him to keep 'em separate. and you issue a written train order and go so far until a certain time and what ever is coming your way clearance.

E: The motorman has to look at his watch and say OK by 6:20 I can't go any further than so and so station?

HW: The conductor is the head of any train.

E: He runs the train too?

HW: No the motorman does what the conductor tells him and he receives orders by written orders it's entered into a log book and the time and all.

E: How many orders would have to be given to run from here, Sebastopol to Santa Rosa, more than one?

HW: Maybe 5, depending who's on the line if it's just 1 car going back and forth but if you get a car on the track you have to have a turnout to wait for you to pass. And that's when money got tight during the Depression, you paid the electric bill for the highest one half hour and any hours up to 30 days at that rate, so no cars ran after the streetcar (passenger) was abandoned. They might have 3 freight traveling during the day and you get orders and not let them all forward freight at the same time and cut the demand way down and they give him a bonus for that.

E: I can see it would be very expensive if they had to pay the highest rate.

HW: And standby equipment - they had to pay a man to run the generator. It's all tied in together.

E: Did you get into the powerhouse as a young person to see what was happening over there, how it operated?

HW: They had a voltage meter on the wall in the office, 600 volt meter. you watched the meter.

E: Sounds like a 3 ring circus?

HW: Then they ran by time and one of the operators in the power house switched his clock so my father was moving loads and timewise it ran the bill up, when it came my father started watching and he got out of his chair and went to the powerhouse when they were off about ten units.

E: How many people did it take to work in the powerhouse?

HW: Just the operator, one person. Course maintenance and all, complicated relay switches and if the voltage was dropped they cut in another generator, motors that ran the train were direct current motors and they had more power demand starting the cars, when you got them moving, today it's automatic. But if you went back to a 1912 Ford there were 3 pedals, you'd have to know how to operate them so you could move.

End of tape.

Note: The P&SR Trainmaster, Harry White Sr.
committed suicide. The impression I received from his son was that his father's death was due to work stress though this was not stated in the taped interview.....E.McClure
Transcribed in 2013